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Henry W. Elliott,
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The sparrow war.

FROM

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Hear what I have to accuse myself of, and know what misery you might have been spared. Before her death, grandmother said that a book was left for me in her desk containing receipts for mental and bodily health, for *men as well as cattle*, and she charged me solemnly to read it carefully and profit by it. Father, you know the rest. I saw this book, and thrust it in a drawer of the desk, and forgot it. God knows my only thoughts were, and have been, of you. And this message from the dead comes too late."

A smile of ineffable peace dwelt upon the old man's face as he whispered: "Not too late, my boy; it is never too late to know that she blessed me at last. Call Marjorie to me."

I approached, and with his poor left hand he drew me to his breast, and kissed and blessed me. Elsie lay weeping by his side, and there was a low wailing outside of the door from the faithful retainers of the household. A heavenly radiance overspread the wan face, the dim eyes looked their last upon his children, and the old laird at last found peace.

X.

It is again the eve of All-Saints. I am no longer Marjorie Cameron, but Mistress Marjorie Ronald, of Grosvenor Square, Glen Ronald, and Macpherson Tower, and though we had been married three months, we—Malcolm and I—never wearied of telling each other again and again the sweet old, old story. We had just returned from the Continent, and, like a willful spoiled child, I insisted upon going direct to Glen Ronald for a week before calling for Elsie at Lady Seton's, and establishing ourselves in London until certain important plans of mine were perfected. We were very rich, my fortune and his together; and Elsie resigned all claim to the Tower conditionally. She said, with saucy imperativeness, that we accepted her as the incumbrance, which my aunt Seton begged to share, for Elsie had quite won her heart. And even Sims proved faithless; so I made her over to her new little mistress, and took honest Jeanie into my especial service under my French maid.

We paced the long drawing-room, Malcolm and I, when the gray gloaming and fire-light blended softly together. The great deer-hound lay stretched on the soft sheep rug. Outside, the wind wailed eeri-

ly about the house, but I no longer trembled, for a protecting arm was about me, and the wealth of a great abiding love encompassed me.

We had discussed, until all argument, all ideas, were exhausted, the subject of my dream and what had appeared to me. We acknowledged our belief that

"millions of spiritual creatures
Walk the earth, both when we wake
And when we sleep."

"And," observed Malcolm, "we have better warrant than superstition for the belief. Why should we doubt the agency of ministering angels? Do you remember, darling, that passage in Klopstock's 'Messiah' in which the angel Abaddon resigns his charge? Even for Judas we can not help but feel a thrill of interest."

"It seems a link between earth and some other space—I dare not say heaven," I returned, "nor yet hell; and the belief in the agency of these spirits is certainly confirmed and sanctioned by the language of Scripture. And now, Malcolm," I added, in my most fascinating manner, drawing down the dear face for a kiss, "do you know that from the first time I ever saw you I called you a grand Viking?"

"And do you know," he interrupted, "that I always called you my Valkyria, though I never dared hope for the heaven you have given me."

"Then we are quits; and you did not have to pass through death to gain your heaven. And now for a boon: promise to say yes." And naturally, with my head leaning against his breast, how could he say nay? "I want you to watch with me to-night, dear Malcolm, in that room. I *must* watch there, if I go alone."

And so it came to pass that again I kept my vigil in that grewsome chamber. A strong arm clasped me, and firm warm hands held mine, as we sat together in the shadow. It was a black night. The loch roared in the distance; rain splashed against the windows in the mirk hours; the wind swept about the trees and around the house with the wail and sob of departing spirits.

We sat in silent expectancy. The night waned, and the cold gray dawn stole into the gloomy room, a warmer light, and we looked each other in the eyes with calm content. The poor ghost had found rest, and the curse had departed for evermore from the house of Ronald.



THE SPARROW WAR.

ONCE upon a time a certain King of Prussia found fault with the sparrow, long before it was brought over here and subjected to the prevailing storm of unfriendly criticism that is now beating upon its hardy head and energetic struggle for existence. This magnate aforesaid was fond of currants, big red Dutch currants, and a row of richly laden bushes, which his gardener was cultivating in confident pride for the ultimate delectation of the royal palate, was the sub-

ject of more attention from his Majesty than the gorgeous flower parterres or the clumps of semi-tropical foliage, transplanted to please his eye, here and there throughout the princely gardens. When the berries were almost blushing in full crimson beauty of ripeness, his Royal Highness made the unpleasant discovery that multitudes of sparrows not only coveted the fruit as much as he, but that they had eaten them all before he could muster an alarm, mount guard, and pick the clusters for himself.

A quaint chronicler tells us, thereupon, that the wrath of his Highness was not confined to a single or repeated explosions of disgust on the garden walks, but that an edict was published at once ordering the extermination of the *Pyrgita domestica*; and so thoroughly did the vassals of the crown carry out this law, that the unhappy sparrows were literally eliminated from the Prussian realms. Then this old historian goes on to say that to the great surprise of "his Majestie" the currant bushes were not permitted, after the expulsion of these birds, to render service after their kind, for a strange fly next year followed, and "did eate y^e leaves" so extensively that the shrubs again failed in bearing; and so on, season after season, until the king, weary of seeing the ravage, revoked the decree of death to the sparrow, and actually paid out of the royal treasury some eight hundred thousand dollars in the form of rewards to his people for their zeal in bringing the exiled birds back.

Thus the sparrow, which we have brought over from the Continent, is no stranger to persecution, and the success with which he fights for a living here augurs well for his future; but, like all other people of pronounced character, he has decided phases of good commingled with much that is as decidedly evil: hence his friends and his foes have arisen, and the overburdened refrain of their angry disavowals and recriminations is spread out within the columns of the press wherever men can read in this country. Now we too have a grievance, but a judicial examination of the offense of the sparrow brings us in good faith to complain just as much of our own robin, which we have immortalized in song and in prose, and many other home birds.

The sparrow comes from a good family, having a host of representatives in Eu-

rope, and a full list in North America; but, strange to say, it is the only scion of this large division of the bird tribe from which the gift of song seems to have been wholly withheld. Everybody who has strolled in the country during May and June has listened to the sweet love carols of our chirping and song sparrows, but no one ever heard the sparrow in question utter a single sound that possessed the faintest melody—nothing but that incessant complaining chirp and distressful chatter from one end of the year to the other—no intermission, no rest. If it could sing like our cat-bird, or even the clumsy robin, for instance, the opposition to it which now exists would, it is safe to say, never have been aroused, because in all fairness, waiving the question of song, the sparrow can not be called any better or worse than the rest of its kind, which are all plump, sober, dull-plumaged birds.

The characteristic preference which the sparrow has for the haunts of man, its selection of the busiest centres of great cities for chief residence and enjoyment, would at first sight imply that it was attached to the personal companionship of ourselves, when, in fact, it will not bear confinement in cages like the robin, the redbird, and a score of others which are indigenous to our country, and are called birds of the wild woods. In this condition it cowers and sulks, refuses food and all attention from our hand, until death relieves it from further suffering. Before, however, beginning to speak of its many peculiarities, it is better that the history of the introduction of this little foreigner should be presented, in order that people may judge of the degree in which an insignificant beginning in some matters may be instrumental in producing results of important and far-reaching consequence.

The first attempt, as far as is known, to introduce the common house-sparrow of Europe to our country was made by a gentleman name Desblois, in Portland, Maine, during the autumn of 1858: he brought over a few birds from the Continent, and liberated them in a large garden which was situated within the central part of the city. They remained there sheltered and secure under the eaves of a neighboring church throughout the winter, and in the following spring settled down happily enough to the labor of nest-building and rearing

their young. Two years later the first pair of these finches were set at liberty near Madison Square, New York city; the importation was steadily repeated, the birds being released in the Central Park and at Jersey City. They were first introduced to Boston in 1868 by the city government, and to Philadelphia by the municipal authorities in 1869, and from these small beginnings the house-sparrow has been spread all over this Northern country wherever we have a city east of the Rocky Mountains, and the fluttering flocks of the robust, noisy little foreigner enliven the streets thereof in every direction. Their numbers are nearly countless.

The object at first for the introduction of the house-sparrow does not seem to have been one of a practical suggestion, but rather one in the nature of sentiment. Since, however, the attention of the citizens was called to the great nuisance of the existence of canker and measure worms in the shade trees of the old cities of the Union, the fact that the house-sparrow would remain with us all winter, and feed as energetically upon the worms as any of our own birds—which always, without exception, left for warmer climes every season—the thought of practical application took life in encouraging the introduction of the English sparrow as a means of relief more certain than that afforded by any or all of our indigenous finches. As soon as this became generally understood, the little John Bull was distributed with great industry all over the country for this purpose; but as sure as it became numerous in any town or city, a spirited opposition sprang up to it, and exists to-day with more or less vitality in every section where the bird is fairly settled. Whole books have been written *pro* and *con*, and naturalists have waged unrelenting war upon one another, as they differed in estimating the value and the services of *Pyrgita domestica*; but in the judgment of the writer, the entire practical bearing of the controversy has not been fully presented by either the friends or the foes of the little finch, for it must seem clear enough to those who will follow the line of argument in this article that while the house-sparrow is eminently fit and wonderfully well constituted for life in Northern cities, yet it is a sad rowdy and nuisance in the country; while in the former case it renders admirable serv-

ice in destroying insect pests that disfigure the shady avenues of city forestry, yet in the latter field it can not compete with our native birds in entomological service to man, and having given good reason for dislike on the part of the growers of fruit, they are doubly incensed because the law will not allow them to shoot, trap, or destroy the enemy.

When, however, we come to regard the sparrow with reference to special adaptation for city life, we are free to acknowledge that it possesses characteristics fitting it for that existence far superior to any of our native birds. It is hardy enough to withstand the shock of our rudest winters; and it is a source of infinite relief and amusement to our people in the large towns all over the country, who, by reason of poverty or else absorbing occupation, are never able to spend their summers in rural districts, and who, were it not for the chattering little finch in question, would hardly know what a wee bird really looked like. Look again at the beautiful adaptation of this expatriated sparrow for a residence in the begrimed and smoky thoroughfares of commerce in our Western cities particularly, where soft coal is the sole fuel and base for heating, lighting, and manufacturing. Here, amid the noise and jar of active business competition, why should the bird sing? Who has time to stop and listen? And if he did, what kind of satisfaction could be gathered, with the banging of a trip-hammer on the one side and the rattling of freight trucks on the other?

No, it is more, much more, than right to ask a bird which shall agree to winter and summer with us in our cities of iron, brick, and stone to possess the power of song, and sing accordingly; it would simply be an idle and extravagant expenditure of a beautiful gift for Nature to endow any such ornithological subject with the faculty—contrary to her perfect laws, and in violation of her perfect wisdom. The idea of a house-sparrow trying to vocalize as it perches on the coping of a pawnbroker's window, while the sound of an auctioneer's bell or of an elevated railway train deafens the ear, and the smoke of a foundry darkens the air!

The pre-eminent qualifications of the sparrow for life in our busy, noisy marts of commerce should not be permitted in the mind of a fair observer to weigh for a moment heavily in its favor as an argu-

ment for adaptation to the suburbs or country residence. Here the *Pyrgita* is a nuisance rather than an aid or pleasure to man. It becomes low and vulgar when brought into contrast with the form, plumage, and song of our own birds; and he who comes out early in the softness of some bright June morning for a stroll over his lawn and a tour of his garden, may be well acquitted of injustice if he shall be found with anger in his heart and wrath in his eye for the hundreds or thousands of little brown sparrows that carouse, like so many rowdy boys, through his cherry-trees, and wantonly shake the dew from his currants into their mischievous beaks.

The intense vitality and self-assurance of the house-sparrow manifests itself, however, to great advantage during the winters that clog our city streets with ice and snow, and by its real philosophy under difficulties it must cheer many a discouraged man or woman to a fresh effort and a lighter heart. It is the only bird not domesticated that will winter and summer alike with us in our Northern cities and villages, and, so far as the writer has ever been able to observe, the *Pyrgita* has never used force to drive other birds from its local habitation; but it is true, however, that most of our songsters are not as noisy or as gregarious during the mating season as is the house-sparrow, and therefore when the former are surrounded by the clatter of the boisterous broods of the latter, many of them naturally retire to more peaceful limits—to the suburbs, and to the country—where they are not annoyed by the incessant gossip and bustle of their imported brethren. During the last fifteen years the writer has resided for a great portion of the time in the Smithsonian Building, that stands surrounded by a fifty-acre park of lawn, forestry, and shrubs, at Washington. He can recall the earlier days when the indigent birds were certainly much more numerous there than they now are, and when their peculiarly sweet songs of May and June delightfully opened and closed the lovely days of that season of the year. The sparrow came a few years ago, and to-day its monotonous chirp is the predominant sound early and late throughout the park and the city, though there are a fair number of our song-sparrows, robins, warblers, and orioles still scattered as they nest here and there within the grounds;

but when they do stay, the incessant harsh chirping of their English cousin seems to rob them of almost all desire to sing themselves, so that we are only treated now to occasional outbursts of their own charming melody.

The sparrow is emphatically a bird of business and nothing else. It has no ear for music, no time for art—no appreciation of the one or the other, but it attends solely and strictly to business, and the great absorbing theme of its energetic life is how to successfully rear three or four broods of its kind every year. The fact that it pays such devoted, diligent attention to this subject is that which renders it of such real, substantial service to the better preservation and protection of our city shade trees. It is very commonly held that the sparrow does not destroy insects by seeking these pests as food, but that it preys upon street sweepings and refuse from dwellings. In this connection the incorrectness of that point may be made entirely clear by calling attention to the probable truth of this fact: not one of the young sparrows, from the day they are hatched until they are fully fledged, can subsist upon any food except the larvæ of insects and certain insects themselves. Therefore each pair of sparrows, in the labor of raising three or four distinct broods of their young during the spring and summer, must seek for and destroy an enormous aggregate of insect and worm life by thus rearing and feeding their hearty, voracious nurslings, because the hunger of the nestlings seems never to be assuaged, while the efforts of the parents to satisfy it do not cease from early dawn until late in the evening. Indeed, so difficult do the old birds find the task of satisfying the craving appetites of their young with this dainty fare that they themselves are frequently compelled to feed in turn upon the coarser and more abundant food which they find in the streets, and when they have been seen feeding in this way by thoughtless people, they have been and they are charged with neglect of their proper duty—the destruction of insect life.

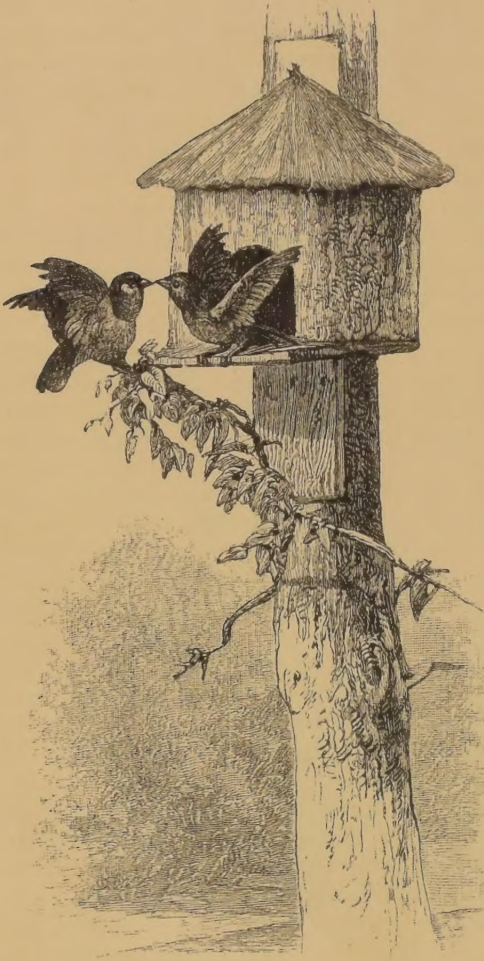
In this devotion to their young from early in May until the end of September, as their swift rotating broods appear, the sparrows in our cities certainly render efficient and valuable service, and though they do crowd out from our parks and squares many of our familiar songsters,

yet they do not do it by force, nor do they entirely drive them away. The writer, as he sits in contemplation of this subject, looks out before him, and directly opposite his window in the Smithsonian Building, at a magnificent elm-tree, in which an orchard oriole, a summer war-

errands. But while it is plain that the sparrows in no way physically whatever molest the warbler or the oriole, yet it is equally apparent that the incessant harsh chirp and chatter of the foreigners depress the spirits of the natives to such an extent that they are seldom heard to exercise their own charming powers of minstrelsy.

Still it should be borne in mind that our blackbirds in the country tease and torment the gentler thrushes and the robins, that the kingbirds worry the doves, and that more or less offensive individuality is the rule always in animal life when the stronger or the aggressive encounter the weaker or more retiring examples of their kind.

So, in summing up the charge for the public, we can not find just ground upon which to remove the sparrow from our cities, where its energetic little life enlivens the toil of the smoke-begrimed labor of those corporations; but we do think that beyond this zone of existence the sparrow ceases to be a fair object for preservation, and we believe that free action should be given to the residents of the suburbs and the country to deal with the mischievous flocks as they deem best; in other words, to let them stand or fall upon their own merits, just as we do with our native species not known to the law as game. No sensible man will wage war upon the birds in his garden, fields, or orchard; if he knows anything at all about them, he knows that they strike a balance with him at the close of the season greatly in his favor; but there are times, exceptional occasions, when it is not only justifiable, but it is necessary, to use powder and shot for the protection of some special crop, and when these occasions arise, the observer will notice, if he lives near the city, that he has not only sparrows to deal with, but he has as much or even greater fault to find with the robins, the orioles, the woodpeckers, and scores of other winged marauders. The inability to resist the temptation of carousing among the rich red or black clusters of fruit on a cherry-tree, or of sampling the aromatic fruit of the vine as it hangs in blue, black, and amber-toned masses on the vines in September, is not a sin peculiar to this bird of the town by any means: it is shared by nearly all of its feathered relatives, be they high or low, and their name is legion.



ENGLISH SPARROWS.

bler, and the sparrow in question are respectively rearing their young. The former has woven its peculiar nest high in the top of the upper limbs; the warbler has knit its tiny couch at the extreme end of a long swaying middle branch; while the sturdy *Pyrgita* has taken possession of a snug little box nailed low down and close to the trunk of the tree. It travels with unremitting diligence to and fro with food for its noisy young, while the song-birds above seem to come and go at comparatively rare intervals on the same

